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ABSTRACT

As more and more agencies are moving toward supplying career information on the World Wide Web, it has become apparent that pre-service counselor education career development courses need to become electronically enhanced. Once this enhancement of face-to-face instruction occurs, it is tempting to move to the delivery of courses through distance education means. Counselor educators receive guidance from within the profession as they determine how technology can be used to enhance the preparation of counselors. However, sometimes it is instructive to review statements from other disciplines. This digest discusses two studies; "What's the Difference? A Review of Contemporary Research on the Effectiveness of Distance Learning in Higher Education" (Phipps and Merisotis, 1999) and "The Virtual University" (Gladieux and Swail, 1999). Selected findings and recommendations from these studies are examined in terms of possible implications for electronically enhanced career development distance education courses. (MKA)

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# Transition of Career Development University Courses to Electronic Formats

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# Transition of Career Development University Courses to Electronic Formats

*Marla P. Peterson*

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## Overview

Preservice counselor education programs usually include two courses on career development theory, research, information and practice. Often theory and research are addressed in one course and career information and career counseling practices are included in another. The World Wide Web (WWW) has burgeoned with sites devoted to career information. Many groups, including the Federal government, have turned to the Internet for delivery of career-related information. It has become apparent that the old didactic "occupational information" courses need to be transformed into electronically enhanced career and educational information systems courses. Once electronic enhancement of face-to-face instruction occurs, it is tempting to move to the delivery of courses through distance education means.

## Guidance from Two Studies

Certainly counselor educators are receiving guidance from within the profession as they determine how technology can be used to enhance the preparation of counselors. However, sometimes it is instructive to review statements from other disciplines. Selected findings and recommendations from two studies are examined in terms of possible implications for electronically enhanced career development distance education courses.

• *1. What's the Difference? A Review of Contemporary Research on the Effectiveness of Distance Learning in Higher Education*, (Phipps and Merisotis, 1999).

*Finding.* Research has tended to emphasize student outcomes for individual courses rather than for a total academic program.

*Implications.* Career development courses which feature didactic rather than clinical instruction have been the first to be electronically enhanced. As other counselor education didactic courses make use of interactive technology and, if clinical instruction is added to this mix, ways must be found to assess the performance of practicing counselors who are graduates of programs where they have been prepared by a cluster of electronic courses.

*Finding.* Research does not take into account differences among students.

*Implications.* Career development theory and content have long recognized that individuals differ in their interests, values, skills, and abilities. Much research remains to be done on preferred ways of acquiring career information and on career information processing patterns.

*Finding.* Research does not adequately explain why the dropout rates of distance learners are higher.

*Implications.* Counselor educators must be clearly cognizant of dropout-rate facts if well-intentioned individuals make suggestions to collapse certain counselor education courses and even entire programs into a distance education consortia configuration. It may well be, however, that career and educational information courses could serve as a fertile ground for experimenting with formats that will decrease dropout rates. If a career development course offered via distance education was constructed as a personal information journey, it could be a source of data on whether a course that focuses on personal meaning has higher retention rates than courses that do not use such an approach.

*Finding.* Research does not take into consideration how the different learning styles of students relate to the use of particular technologies and research focuses mostly on the impact of individual technologies rather than on the interaction of multiple technologies.

*Implications.* The newest Web-based courseware programs feature multiple technologies. Increasingly it will be a question of which technology is the best for particular content for a particular learner. The courses offered by the British Open University often include a mix of media and materials and are expensive to produce. One course was designed by a 40-person course team and will be among the first seven offered in the United States. The material for this course "include four books, several study guides, five specially produced half-hour television shows, and a set of audiotapes" (Blumenstyk, 1999, A 36). Of the 300+ courses developed by the Open University, only six are designed to be completely Internet based and these are primarily in the area of computing and information technology.

*Finding.* Research does not include a theoretical or conceptual framework.

*Implications.* The preparation of career counselors requires both didactic and clinical instruction. It is in the clinical arena that those who prepare counselors can make a major contribution in building research models. For example, do research designs adequately address whether didactic instruction learned through electronically enhanced means contribute to building better clinical skills?

*Finding.* Research does not adequately address the effectiveness of digital "libraries."

*Implications.* This concern is also being addressed by ACA, NCDA, ACES, and ASCA. The Web is a very open system with no quality control in terms of what types of career information and career development sites are constructed. Many sites are developed by self-proclaimed career development experts with little background in career development theory or experience in working with the target audience for which the site was developed. Some responsibility rests with federal and state government offices that have awarded money for the development of such sites. Counselor educators who develop electronic syllabi should include links to sites that represent the highest ethical and content standards of the profession. They should not be reticent to point out shortcomings of sites that are not based on sound career development theory and which do not reveal the credentials of the site owner/developer.

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• 2. Recommendations from *The Virtual University & Educational Opportunity*, (Gladieux and Swail, 1999)

*Recommendation.* Place access at the core of systems design.

*Implications.* The Gladieux and Swail study reports that a "digital divide" is being created in that the distribution of computers is "highly stratified by socioeconomic class" (p. 17) and that there is wide disparities in access to computers by income, race/ethnicity, and educational attainment. The "digital divide" grows even greater if counselors do not have access to equipment and the skills to help clients access job openings, college admissions, financial aid, and other types of career and educational information. New counselor education graduates and experienced counselors who do not receive such preparation are at a serious disadvantage. Further, they may place their clients at a serious disadvantage. Perhaps there is a "digital divide" in the preparation of counselors. Some university counselor education programs may have far greater access to computing resources than others.

*Recommendation.* Keep the promise of technology in perspective.

*Implications.* Technology can assist in locating career and educational information but clients must act on the information. Although technology can help prompt actions, it often takes face-to-face human interaction to help clients sort information, rehearse actions and follow through to achieve personal goals.

*Recommendation.* Learn from the distance-learning pioneers.

*Implications.* Faculty members at universities like Virginia Tech where a distance education career development course is being offered and The University of Tennessee where the first Web-enhanced career development course was developed can provide valuable insights in terms of designing instructional activities that seem to work in graduate courses. British Open University personnel have valuable information to share in terms of emphasis that is placed on team approaches to course development, course development costs, and the proper mix of face-to-face versus remote instruction.

*Recommendation.* Take action to narrow the digital divide.

*Implications.* The "digital divide" between trained and untrained counselors should be a particular focus of university counselor educators. Here are some straightforward suggestions: Support counselor educator colleagues who want to learn new technologies. Convert occupational/career information courses to Web-based courses. Advocate for access to computer classrooms. Ask counselor education interns to assist practicing counselors in learning how to use the Web.

*Recommendation.* Monitor progress toward equal access.

*Implications.* In a time when 40 percent of classrooms in schools with the highest concentration of poor students (measured by percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch) have Internet access, compared to more than 60 percent of classrooms in schools with the lowest concentration of poor students (Rowand, 1999), and when half the schools that are connected to the Internet are connected only at the library/media center or principal's office (Quality Education Data, 1998), counselors must become advocates for equal access to technology. Counselors work with all students and they are in a position to make strong arguments as to why they need technology to help students enter further education and employment settings.

## Summary

There is little doubt that advances in technology have opened many new possibilities for delivering instruction. Even though the content of courses that deal with career and educational information seem to be a natural fit for electronically enhanced instruction, those who prepare counselors need to be aware that there is a lack of quality research on the effectiveness of distance education and that technology is creating a "digital divide."

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